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EXCERPTED

White House Is Reported Losing Confidence as Well as Key Staff

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WASHINGTON, Feb. 7 — As Ronald Reagan enters the final two years of his Presidency, his White House has started to lose the distinctive aura of confidence and control that contributed heavily to the many achievements of his first six years in office, according to White House insiders and Reagan supporters outside the Government.

This sharp shift in the White House mood has already eroded the President's ability to retain and recruit top-flight talent in his personal staff operation, the officials say. And it is threatening to undermine Mr. Reagan's ability to prepare and promote a legislative program that has already been significantly reduced in scope.

'Another Battery Charge'

The disarray, the officials agree, has been caused by a series of setbacks that compound one another, from the Democratic triumph in the November elections to the draining distractions of the Iran arms affair and the health of Mr. Reagan, who had prostate surgery last month. In addition, many Republicans voice doubt about their party's ability to keep the White House, or recapture the Senate, in 1988.

"There is no question that there is some concern," said a senior White House aide, who, like many others, spoke on condition of anonymity. "We really need to re-energize the Reagan Presidency. We need another battery charge."

Another high White House official added: "If I had to pick a single word to describe things around here it would probably be 'passivity.' That's what people are surprised about here. There's not the aggressive handling of subject matters."

'Plateau' Seen as Temporary

A former White House staff member who remains close to the operation said: "I feel let down, and I don't think I'm alone. One of the things that attracted us to Reagan was that he restored our sense of pride, of confidence, of viability. Every single bit of that is in the process of being lost."

Marlin Fitzwater, the President's spokesman, acknowledged that the White House seemed to be on a "plateau." But he added, "The impression of forward motion within the Administration will be evident very soon."

He said the current sense of White House lethargy resulted from "the time it takes for the President to recuperate from his operation, and for the Iran investigation to get started."

"The President is eager to engage," Mr. Fitzwater added, "and the President's staff is preparing an aggressive

program for the spring." Today, in his weekly radio address, Mr. Reagan highlighted one element of that program, saying he would ask Congress to give the states more power to experiment with welfare changes.

To others close to the Reagan Presidency, the problems in the White House are more profound, and as evidence they point to the steady exodus of experienced people from important staff positions. In recent days two of Mr. Reagan's top advisers have announced their departures: Mitchell E. Daniels Jr., his assistant for political affairs, and Patrick J. Buchanan, the director of communications.

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A Turn to Professionals

But others say recruitment is already a problem, noting that no successors have been named for Mr. Daniels, Mr. Buchanan, or Mr. Kingon. Many of those appointed recently, such as Mr. Fitzwater and Robert M. Gates, the new Director of Central Intelligence, are the sort of professional Government officials that Mr. Reagan once campaigned vigorously against.

Those professionals are in many cases the only options available to the President. Now that the State of the Union Message has been made, new officials coming in from outside would have only limited ability to shape this year's agenda. And by next year, Presidential campaign politics will be dominating the capital.

"As time passes, it gets harder and harder," a former White House official said of the recruitment problem. "Starting a few months from now, it will be almost impossible."

That is one of the reasons the President's friends have tried so hard to remove Mr. Reagan. They are worried that even if he leaves in a few months, it will be too late to attract a top-flight replacement such as Drew Lewis, the former Secretary of Transportation, or William P. Clark, the former national security adviser who was chief of staff to Mr. Reagan when he was Governor of California.

"I think it's too late — I think they've blown it," said a Republican strategist with close ties to the White House. "And it's a shame, too. Of all Presidents, this shouldn't happen to Ronald Reagan."

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